



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE.

VOL. VIII. — JULY-SEPTEMBER, 1895. — No. XXX.

---

## SOME CAUSES OF THE RETARDATION OF AFRICAN PROGRESS.

No generation has ever witnessed such rapid and radical changes in the cartography of a continent as ours has in that of Africa. No less rapid and thorough is the modification taking place in the estimate placed by the scientific world on the physical, intellectual, and moral character and possibilities of the African negro, or Bantu-negro race, which constitutes about three fourths of the whole African population.

When I began my studies (which happened to be chiefly in the German school), popular ethnologic opinion placed the negro race at the bottom of the scale of human races and the Germanic at the top. The negro was considered to be an imperfect human being, the residue of an unsuccessful attempt of Nature at man-making, a clog in the wheel of progressive evolution which Nature would have to eliminate in order to make room for the Germanic race, in whom alone she had realized her ideal of human kind.

I must confess that when I first went to Africa, ten years ago, I was myself so imbued with the prevailing prejudice that it was a continual surprise to meet so many indications of the African negro's similarity to our own white humanity. Not that I overlooked its vices — which are human — or underrated its peculiar weaknesses, but these I found to be traceable to the difference in religion, knowledge, and environment rather than to constitutional inferiority.

To-day public opinion in Germany and elsewhere is largely reversing its judgment. As Central Africa is no longer the arid and torrid desert of the geographies of our fathers, so the African native is no longer a fatally inferior being, doomed to eternal subjection, or even extinction. No German acquainted with colonial affairs entertains now any hope of the German race superseding the native races of Africa, or even of the Germans maintaining their political and commercial supremacy for more than a few generations.

The warlike Germans have learned to appreciate the military abilities of the African negro. In the recent colonial wars, the German arms — fondly thought to be invincible — have been repeatedly defeated by bush-natives armed with arrows and flint-locks, while hired negro soldiers of the colonial troops have had to be medalled, publicly praised, and raised in rank for heroic behavior on the battlefield. Now, too, German authorities and scientific institutions, while not undervaluing the geographical information of travellers, turn to the resident missionaries for reliable data on African questions, and realize the importance of their coöperation in the solution of the great social problems of the colonies.

In England, where since the days of Wilberforce the prejudice has ceased to be as general as elsewhere, a marked change for the better is also noticed in the way the government and the secular press treat African affairs, and the motto "Africa for the African and by the African" is gaining more and more favor.

The question which now arises is: How is it, that with such a bright intellect, backed by such a hardy physique, the African negro should have remained in such a low state of culture?

It is my object in this paper, not to demonstrate the causes of this stagnation, but to give the result of my direct observations as to some of these causes.

The statement of these causes will also show what obstacles are to be removed or overcome before the African negro, as a race, can enter an era of healthy, steady, and ever-expanding development.

Let me premise that my statements refer to the whole black or negro race of Africa, including the Bantu, the Upper Guinea, and the Sudan tribes, all of which constitute one family and race, the differences being chiefly tribal and, to some extent, linguistic.

As I see things after nine years of personal dealing with native Africans, and a longer period of study, the principal visible causes of the stagnation of African native civilization are these: 1, seclusion and climate; 2, the lack of a system of writing; 3, polygamy; 4, slavery; 5, the fear of witchcraft. Of these hindrances the fear of witchcraft is by far the most universal, the most pernicious, and the most difficult to overcome.

1. *Seclusion.* As far as our knowledge goes, no race or nation ever developed a great civilization entirely from its own native elements. Everywhere the golden age of a nation seems to have been preceded by the importation of foreign ideas and due to the ingrafting of these on a national stock. Moreover, the progressive development of a civilization seems to be dependent upon the continued introduction of foreign elements, physical as well as intellectual and moral.

Since the dawn of history, the bulk of Africa has never been in direct and enduring intercourse with a life-giving civilization. No doubt, all African arts show some remote contact with Egypt, and it is probable that the Punas, settled on both sides of the Red Sea, which is said to have received its name from them, had settlements along the East Coast and built the towers of Zimbabwe in Mashonaland. But they seem to have been only temporary residents, buying the produce of the country and mining for gold. On the north the Sahara has ever been a barrier between Central Africa and the civilizations of the Mediterranean.

For four hundred years the West Coast has been visited by nominal Christians, but man-stealing was the only real object of their expeditions and it is no wonder that vice and crime should have been the only things encouraged by their presence.

The negro nation of the Uaua, neighbors of the ancient Egyptians, the Sudan tribes which have adopted Islam, and the tribes of West and South Africa which have been under British and Portuguese influence since the extinction of the ultramarine slave traffic, have proved that the seeds of genuine civilization, dropped in African negro soil, in due course of time yield satisfactory fruits.

Nor should we forget that, as necessity is the mother of invention, and as bountiful nature supplies the African with all his needs without great exertion on his part, the lack of this great stimulus of human activity and invention must have had a retarding influence on his development.

2. *The Lack of a Written Literature.* For a long time it was considered a fact that the African negroes had no native and tribal literature, and it was assumed that they had none because they were unable to produce them. Recent researches, however, have proved that the unwritten literature of Africa compares favorably with that of any other continent or race. The higher education of native Africans has also proved that, far from showing an absolute inferiority, the negro is rather better gifted than the Germanic race in purely literary ability. Africans, as a rule, are born elocutionists, linguists, and musicians, but they are lacking in the logic, the depth of thought and feeling so characteristic of the Germanic race. Why, of all races, the negro should have failed to invent<sup>1</sup> or adopt a system of writing is a mystery. That they would have developed a great native literature and a considerable native civilization, if the thoughts and the inventions of their geniuses could have been accumulated and transmitted to successive generations, will easily be admitted by those who have had fair dealings with unspoiled African

<sup>1</sup> The original characters used in the Vey language are modern, and were suggested to the inventor by the Arabic.

natives. One reason why a system of writing was never introduced, or why, if ever it was, it never became general, is found in the fact that a genius or innovator in Africa is almost sure to be accused of witchcraft and to suffer death. We know how much religious intolerance has done, and is yet doing in certain parts, to check human progress. Incomparably more pernicious and effectual has been the pagan intolerance engendered by the fear of witchcraft.

3. *Polygamy.* This social institution has from the remotest times prevailed in every tribe of African negroes. I have never heard of a single tribe practising monogamy as an institution. Nevertheless, African folk-tales and conversation with uncivilized natives show that the evils of the system are not ignored, and that the superiority of monogamy is readily acknowledged, at least in theory. In Africa as elsewhere, males and females are born in about equal numbers. Where polygamy is honored, every man who has the means buys as many wives as he can. This implies that for every married man there must be several involuntary bachelors. As it is also natural that the man can have only one favorite at a time, it follows that the neglected wives and the bachelors will meet in some way or other. Even where, as in some tribes, adultery is sure to be punished by death, the tendency to reëstablish the balance of nature is so strong that executions of guilty parties are rare occurrences. This state of morals is accompanied by uncertain paternity and a weakening of paternal and filial affection. These affections are still more weakened by the fact that a man who has dozens of children, many of whom he seldom sees, cannot love them equally, and has to leave their education entirely to the mothers, with whose secret lovers the children have often more sympathy than with their putative father. Another result of this system is that a man becomes selfish, and enjoys all he can of the present life without troubling himself much with the future welfare of his numerous and doubtful offspring.

4. *Slavery.* This social institution seems to be inseparable from polygamy. Where woman is sought and paid for by the rich, she becomes merchandise, and is sold sometimes in her childhood, by those who have authority over her, without much regard for her inclination. In most African tribes, children are the property of their maternal uncles, who have the power to sell them almost as they please. As there are no prisons or penitentiaries, all penalties are reduced to that of death, or the payment of a fine. When a man is unable to pay a debt or the fine imposed on his own crime, or that of nephew or niece for whom he is responsible, he is seized and sold into slavery, which is the African penal servitude. If he owns nephews or nieces, he sells one or more of these in his own stead,

and they rarely murmur. This is the main source of the native slavery and slave trade; and it is evident that edicts of European governments are not sufficient to abolish the system. In case of war, the vanquished are often made to pay the indemnity of war by serving their conquerors, and these, being unable to keep so many forced slaves in subjection, sell them to far-off tribes for what they can fetch. Wherever slavery exists, the hard labor is performed by the slaves (if the women be considered slaves), and labor becomes a stigma instead of an honor. That no great progress can be achieved, where work and effort are despised and idleness is honored, is evident. In Loanda, the colored pupils of my paying school would not even carry their own schoolbooks, because they had slave children to do that, and they were afraid somebody might take them to be slaves if they were seen doing anything usually done by slaves. They also objected to my teaching slave boys, as that would stamp study as a slavish occupation. Much of the laziness attributed to African negroes is due to this feeling of caste. In some countries, as the British Oil Rivers Protectorate, nearly all the free men are wealthy merchants, while the mass of the population which do all the labor are their slaves. As the commerce of the whites, not less than the power of the ruling native aristocracy, depends on the system of slave-labor, the latter is defended and secretly protected even by those whose duty it is to work for its abolition.

5. *Witchcraft.* No one doubts that the material prosperity of a people depends on their intellectual, moral, and social development, and but few doubt that the intellectual, moral, and social state of a people is the result and consequence of their religious convictions, that is, of their personal relation to God and the spiritual world. In theory, African mythology or religion is not so far from the truth as is generally supposed. All African negroes, from one end of the field to the other, believe in a creator and controller of all things, invisible, yet omnipresent and omnipotent. The fact that the name of this supreme being recurs among the most distant tribes seems to prove that the race had the idea and the name before its dispersion in hundreds of tribes and dialects. Being invisible, God is never represented by an idol or believed to exist in any object or place; nor is he worshipped by any visible cult. In spirit and in truth, however, God is worshipped by the African more than most of us suspect. God's name passes frequently over the African's lips, and never without a sense of profound reverence. In trouble, God is sometimes invoked directly; in joy he is praised; and the fullest dependence on him is constantly acknowledged. But, as tradition goes, men have offended God, and he has become indifferent to their weal or woe, leaving them alone in their strug-

gle with nature, beasts, fellow-men, and spirits. These spiritual beings are said to fill the air and the earth. They are not limited by matter, space, or time. They are neither absolutely good nor bad, but have the same passions as men. They are clearly divided into two classes: that of human spirits, that is, the shades, manes, ghosts, or souls of deceased men, and that of natural spirits, or genii. They intervene like clouds between man and his creator, who is lost sight of in the constant dread of invisible and intangible enemies. As the spirits can influence both natural elements and men either for or against man, and as they can be propitiated by gifts and enlisted one against another, it is to these inferior spirits the African looks for preservation from harm and for success in his undertakings, that is, for happiness. They speak to men in dreams and visions, but most frequently through human media. These media are generally called, in English, fetish-men, medicine-men, doctors, or priests. Though forming a sort of secret society and wielding great power individually, they have no hierarchic organization, and exert, as a rule, no combined effort as a class. The fetish-man or medium is not a witch. Consulting and enlisting spirits in self-defence or for blessings is considered a duty, not a crime. But the misuse of a spiritual influence for bringing harm, especially sickness and death, on one's fellow-creatures is the most heinous crime. It is almost invariably punished by death or banishment in slavery. As everybody has dealings with the spirits, and the criminal use of their influence cannot be detected by the senses, it is public opinion which accuses a man of witchcraft and brings him to the bar of the poison test, or divine ordeal, and the latter decides whether the suspicion is correct or not. When a person dies, his or her relations generally go to a diviner in order to find out who or what caused the death of their relative; for it is hardly ever believed that a person has died of purely natural causes. Thus it devolves on the diviner—who in the native mind and language is not confounded with the healer or medicine-man—to point out the guilty party, and he generally allows himself to be guided by a bribe, or personal antipathy, but especially by public opinion. For the people are prone to believe what they desire, and if the diviner fails to discover their preferences, which often have not yet reached the point of consciousness or open expression, he is declared to be a false prophet, and another diviner is resorted to. It may be stated that for every few persons who die a natural death some innocent person has to fall a victim to the belief in witchcraft.

Amid all the carnage caused by this fatal belief, one is tempted to overlook the fact that, in the absence of a better religion, it does some good in preventing much oppression and crime. The weakest

slave may by witchcraft avenge himself on the most powerful tyrant, and this checks many a passionate or powerful man. The moment an African has offended another, the fear of the angry person's revenge by witchcraft creeps into his bosom and often haunts him day and night. The wisest course, then, is to avoid giving offence. Woe to the chief himself if he arouses popular ill-will; he may be pointed out as the cause of any public or private misfortune, and his office will not protect him if there is no popular favor to back it.

On the other hand, no serious progress is possible as long as this belief and practice exists. Envy is as dangerous as revenge. If a man in a tribe should attempt to introduce new ideas or customs — unless he be a dreaded chief or a popular diviner believed to simply voice the behest of some great spirit — he would probably arouse some opposition, be accused of witchcraft at the first chance, and perish. If a man shows any spark of genius, either by an invention or more rational conceptions, his superior talents may be ascribed to an enlisted spirit, envy or fear prepossess against him, and he may pay with his life the crime of daring to know more than the others. If a man accumulates wealth — that is, women, slaves, cattle, cloth, powder, and guns, — his prosperity is attributed to the good luck imparted by a spirit, and if he refuses to freely distribute his wealth to his tribesmen, who cling to him like vampires, envy will start a rumor, and when the diviner has to find out a witch, the prospect of a banquet and the spoils may tempt him and the assembled people to choose as a victim the man who dared to be richer than his neighbors.

I know, at Loanda, a native of the Kisama who, as slave on a plantation, was taught carpentry. Since his liberation this industry has enabled him to buy six or seven good native houses and two stone houses which he lets out to white people. In spite of his actual wealth, he goes about in ragged clothes, and endeavors, by lies and lame excuses, to impress one with the idea that he is not so rich as the people say. When asked for the reason of this strange behavior, his answer was: "If I lived in grand style and dressed well it would create envy, and the envious would bewitch me." Meantime he invests part of his money in powerful charms, in order to counteract the hostile spirits which his enemies may enlist against him.

If a chief tries to rule independently of his headmen or the diviners, or if he resists a popular conviction, one oracle after another may declare him guilty of this or that calamity, and the frenzied people may at any moment fall on him like wolves. Thus King Lewanika, the powerful ruler of the Ba-rotse and a dozen subjected tribes, on whose word depend the lives of thousands, saw not long ago some



of the Mambunda diviners enter his royal court and there divine that he, Lewanika, was the cause of the drought which afflicted his people. But for the presence of the missionary Coillard, the furious king might have there and then drowned the voices of the diviners in their blood, or they might have felt strong enough to issue a decree of the spirits against him and make a revolution. At all events, the audacity of the diviners was a warning to the king.

From what precedes, it is evident that in order to regenerate Africa and bring about the abolition of slavery and polygamy more is required than decrees of European governments or the influence of commerce and secular or industrial education. Especially with regard to witchcraft does one feel the weakness of mere legislation or material civilization, and the necessity of introducing in the place of an erroneous and pernicious system those principles of Christianity which have produced such blessed results in the moral, intellectual, and material development in the leading nations of Europe and America.

*Heli Chatelain.*